

## **PERFECT FAILURE**

### *COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS TO GRADUATING CLASS OF THE BUCKLEY SCHOOL*

*June 10, 2009*

When I was asked to give the commencement address to a graduating class of 9<sup>th</sup> graders, I jumped at the chance. You see, I have four teenagers of my own and I feel like this is the point in my life when I am supposed to tell them something profound. So thank you Buckley community for giving me this opportunity. I tried this speech out on them last night and am happy to report that none of them fell asleep until I was three quarters done.

When composing this message I searched my memory for my same experience back in 1969 when I was sitting right where you are. I realized that I could hardly remember one single speaker from my junior high or high school days. Now that could be my age. I'm old enough now that some days I can't remember how old

I am. But it could also have been a sign of the times. Remember, I was part of the student rebellion, and we did not listen to anything that someone over 30 said because they were just too clueless. Or so we thought.

Anyway, as I sat there considering this speech further, I suddenly had a flashback of the one speaker who I actually did remember from youthful days. He was a Shakespearean actor who came to our school to extol the virtues of Shakespeare. He started out by telling us that Shakespeare was not about poetry or romance or love, but instead, was all about battle, and fighting and death and war. Then he pulled out a huge sword which he began waving over the top of his head as he described various bloody conflicts that were all part and parcel of Shakespeare's plays. Now being a 15-year old testosterone laden student at an all boys school, I thought this was pretty cool. I remember thinking, "Yea, this guy gets it. Forget about the deep meaning and messages in the words, let's talk about who's getting the blade."

As you can see, I have a similar sword which I am going to stop waving over my head now, because A) I think you are permanently scarred, and B) the headmaster looks like he is about to tackle me and C) some of you, I can tell, are way too excited about this sword, and you're scaring me a little.

I'm here with you young men today because your parents wanted me to speak to you about service—that is, serving others and giving back to the broader community for the blessings that you have received in your life. But that is a speech for a later time in your life. Don't get me wrong, serving others is really, really important. It truly is the secret to happiness in life. I swear to God. Money won't do it. Fame won't do it. Nor will sex, drugs, homeruns or high achievement. But now I am getting preachy.

Today, I want to talk to you about the dirtiest word that any of you 9<sup>th</sup> graders know. It's a word that is so terrible that your

parents won't talk about it; your teachers won't talk about it; and you certainly don't ever want to dwell on it. But this is a preparatory school, and you need to be prepared to deal with this phenomenon because you will experience it. That is a guarantee. Every single one of you will experience it not once but multiple times, and every adult in this room has had to deal with this in its many forms and manifestations. It's the "F" word.

FAILURE. Failure that is so mortifying and so devastating that it makes you try to become invisible. It makes you want to hide your face, your soul, your being from everyone else because of the shame. Trust me, boys—if you haven't already tasted that, you will. I am sure most of you here already have. AND IT IS HARD. I know this firsthand, but I also know that failure was a key element to my life's journey.

My first real failure was in 1966 in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I played on our basketball team, and I was the smallest and youngest kid on the

team. It was the last game of the season and I was the only player on the squad that had not scored a point all season. So in the second half the coach directed all the kids to throw me the ball when I went in, and for me to shoot so that I would score. The problem was that Coach Clark said it loud enough that every person in the stands could hear it as well as every member of the opposing team. Going into the fourth quarter, our team was well ahead, Coach Clark inserted me and thus, began the worst eight minutes of my life up until that point. Every time I got the ball, the entire other team would rush towards me, and on top of that, that afternoon I was the greatest brick layer the world had ever seen. The game ended. I had missed five shots, and the other team erupted in jubilation that I had not scored. I ran out of the gym as fast as I could only to bump into two of the opposing team's players who proceeded to laugh and tease and ridicule me. I cried and hid in the bathroom. Well, that passed, and I kept trying team sports, but I was just too small to really compete. So in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I took up boxing where suddenly everyone was my size and

weight. I nearly won the Memphis Golden Gloves my senior year in high school and did win the collegiate championship when I was 19. Standing in the middle of that ring and getting that trophy, I still remember looking around for those two little kids who had run me into that bathroom back in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, because I was going to knock their blocks off. That's one problem with failure. It can stay with you for a very long time.

The next time the dragon of failure reared his ugly head was in 1978. I was working in New Orleans for one of the greatest cotton traders of all time, Eli Tullis. Now, New Orleans is an unbelievable city. It has the Strawberry Festival, the Jazz Festival, the Sugar Bowl, Mardi Gras, and just about every other excuse for a party that you can ever imagine. Heck, in that town, waking up was an excuse to party. I was still pretty fresh out of college, and my mentality, unfortunately, was still firmly set on fraternity row. It was a Friday morning in June, and I had been out literally all night with a bunch of my friends. My job was to man the phone all

day during trading hours and call cotton prices quotes from New York into Mr. Tullis' office. Around noon, things got quiet on the New York floor, and I got overly drowsy. The next thing I remember was a ruler prying my chin off my chest, and Mr. Tullis calling to me, "Paul. Paul." My eyes fluttered opened and as I came to my senses, he said to me, "Son, you are fired." I'd never been so shocked or hurt in my life. I literally thought I was going to die for I had just been sacked by an iconic figure in my business.

My shame turned into anger. I was not angry at Mr. Tullis for he was right. I was angry at myself. But I knew I was not a failure, and I swore that I was going to prove to myself that I could be a success. I called a friend and secured a job on the floor of the New York Cotton Exchange and moved to the City. Today, I will put my work ethic up against anybody's on Wall Street. Failure will give you a tattoo that will stay with you your whole life, and sometimes it's a really good thing. One other side note, to this day, I've never told my parents that I got fired. I told them I just

wanted to try something different. Shame can be a lifetime companion for which you better prepare yourself.

Now, there are two types of failure you will experience in life. The first type is what I just described and comes from things you can control. That is the worst kind. But there is another form of failure that will be equally devastating to you, and that is the kind beyond your control. This happened to me in 1982. I had met a very lovely young Harvard student from Connecticut, dated her for two years then asked her to marry me right after she graduated from college. We set a date; we sent out the invitations; and all was fantastic until one month before the wedding when her father called me. He said, “Paul, my daughter sat me down this afternoon, and she doesn’t know how to tell you this, but she is really unhappy and thinks it’s time for you two to take a break.” At first I thought he was joking because he was a very funny guy. Then he said, “No, she is serious about this.” I thought to myself, “Oh, my God, I am being dumped at the altar.” I’m from



Tennessee. Getting dumped at the altar was the supreme social embarrassment of that time. It was a big deal. When all my family and friends found out, they were ready to re-start the Civil War on the spot. I had to remind them that the last Civil War didn't go so well for our side, and I didn't like our chances in a rematch. The reality was that I was a 26-year old knucklehead, and since all my friends were getting married, I kind of felt it was time for me to do the same thing. And that was the worst reason in the world to get married. I actually think she understood that and to a certain extent spared me what would have been a very tough marriage. Instead, I've had an incredible marriage for twenty years to a wonderful wife, and we have four kids that I love more than anything on Earth. Some things happen to you that at the time will make you feel like the world is coming to an end, but in actuality, there is a very good reason for it. You just can't see it and don't know it. When one door closes, another will open, but standing in that hallway can be hell. You just have to persevere. Quite often

that dragon of failure is really chasing you off the wrong road and on to the right one.

By now you are thinking, how much longer is this loser going to keep on talking. My kids are all teenagers, and whenever I'm telling them something I think is important, they often wonder the same thing. But the main point I want you to take away today is that some of your greatest successes are going to be the children of failure. This touches upon the original reason I was invited here today. In 1986, I adopted a class of Bedford Stuyvesant 6<sup>th</sup> graders and promised them if they graduated from high school, I would pay for their college. For those of you who don't know, Bed-Stuy is one of New York City's toughest neighborhoods. Even the rats are scared to go there at night. Statistically about 8% of the class I adopted would graduate from high school, so my intervention was designed to get them all into college. For the next six years, I did everything I could for them. I spent about \$5,000 annually per student taking them on ski trips, taking them to

Africa, taking them to my home in Virginia on the weekends, having report card night, hiring a counselor to help coordinate afternoon activities and doing my heartfelt best to get them ready for college. Six years later, a researcher from Harvard contacted me and asked if he could study my kids as part of an overall assessment of what then was called the “I Have a Dream” Program. I said sure. He came back to me a few months later and shared some really disturbing statistics. 86 kids that I had poured my heart and soul into for six years were statistically no different than kids from a nearby school that did not have the services our afterschool program provided. There was no difference in graduation rates, dropout rates, academic scores, teenage pregnancies, and the list went on. The only thing that we managed to do was get three times as many of our kids into college because we were offering scholarships whereas the other schools were not. But in terms of preparing these kids for college, we completely and totally failed. Boy, did this open my eyes. That was the first real-time example for me of how intellectual capital

will always trump financial capital. In other words, I had the money to help these kids, but it was useless because I didn't have the brains to help them. I had tried to succeed with sheer force of will and energy and financial resources. I learned that this was not enough. What I needed were better defined goals, better metrics, and most importantly, more efficient technologies that would enable me to achieve those goals. What that whole experience taught me was that starting with kids at age 12 was 12 years too late. An afterschool program was actually putting a band-aid on a much deeper structural issue, and that was that our public education system was failing us. So in 2000, along with the greatest educator I knew, a young man named Norman Atkins, we started the Excellence Charter School in Bedford Stuyvesant for boys. We set the explicit goal of hiring the best teachers with the greatest set of skills to be the top performing school in the city. Now that was an ambitious goal but last year in 2008, Excellence ranked #1 out of 543 public schools in New York City for reading and math proficiency for any third and fourth grade cohort, and our

school was 98% African American boys. We never would have done that had I not failed almost 15 years earlier.

So here is the point: you are going to meet the dragon of failure in your life. You may not get into the school you want or you may get kicked out of the school you are in. You may get your heart broken by the girl of your dreams or God forbid, get into an accident beyond your control. But the point is that everything happens for a reason. At the time it may not be clear. And certainly the pain and the shame are going to be overwhelming and devastating. But just as sure as the sun comes up, there will come a time on the next day or the next week or the next year, when you will grab that sword and point it at that dragon and tell him, "Be gone, dragon. Tarry with me and I will cut your head off. For I must find the destination God and life hold in store for me!"

Young men of Buckley, good luck on your journey.....